

TWENTY-EIGHTH EVENING LECTURE.

(May 15, 1885.)

Preparing to write a sermon which he is to deliver from his pulpit, a minister should approach this task every time with fear and trembling, that is, with the reverent concern that he preach nothing contrary to the Word of God. He must most carefully examine everything that he has written down to see whether it is in harmony with the Word of God and the experience of Christians. He should weigh everything that he is to speak in public in the scales of the sanctuary for weighing gold to see whether it agrees with the writings of the apostles and prophets. A preacher, after writing a few paragraphs, may be impressed with the beauty and power of what he has written and think that he has succeeded well in his effort. Yet he must not allow that impression to delude him, but he ought carefully once more to go over the very passages which seem so beautiful to him to see whether they contain anything that is false or that has been expressed in such a manner as to be liable to be misunderstood and to arouse false conceptions in his hearers. As soon as he notices something of this kind, he must be stern, yea, cruel, against himself and draw a heavy black line through the beautiful periods, even if he has bestowed much time and labor upon them. Those periods represent labor lost because they were merely the product of his genius, not of a clear knowledge drawn from the Word of God. Indeed, a preacher may discover with considerable alarm that an entire part of his sermon, or even the entire sermon, has turned out altogether wrong. In a case like that he must not say that he cannot afford to have spent so much labor in vain. If the product turned out wrong, it must be cashiered. There are no two ways about this. If he has no time to write a new sermon, he had better speak rather extempore than deliver what he has laboriously composed. If a minister who is otherwise conscientious has had the misfortune of putting something into his manuscript that is wrong and even saying it from the pulpit, he must, if he notices his mistake while preaching, immediately correct himself and tell his hearers that he really did not mean to say what they have just heard from him. If he notices his mistake later and the matter is of considerable importance, he must make the correction later, lest his hearers be led utterly astray. Yea, he may not only have to correct his wrong statement, but solemnly to revoke it. That will not

lower him in the esteem of his listeners; on the contrary, his conscientious striving for accuracy will rather impress them favorably. He must not rely on the ability of his hearers to give the correct interpretation to incorrect statements of his, but must speak so as not to be misunderstood in what he says.

For this reason the apostle addresses this warning to all preachers: “Know ye not that a little leaven leaveneth the whole lump?” 1 Cor. 5, 6; comp. Gal. 5, 9. False teaching is a leaven, yea, we might say, a poison, that will penetrate every artery and kill a person. It is a fact experienced every day that a little poison produces awful effects; it may prove fatal to a person; while a whole piece of arsenic may be swallowed without injury because it becomes enwrapped in saliva. Unspeakably great damage may be caused by one false sentence spoken in a sermon. For instance, the preacher may administer an unwarranted reproof that is taken up by godly, conscientious Christians who are full of concern about their soul and are working out their salvation with fear and trembling. When such sincere Christians observe in themselves something that the preacher has marked as a fault and as something by which men may forfeit divine grace, they may become uncertain of their state of grace and imagine that they dare not believe that they will be saved. In a case like this the preacher must not think that by talking on the same topic in a different strain on some future Sunday he will have furnished the needed corrective. For the greater the confidence which his hearers have in his orthodoxy, his genuine Christianity, and his great experience, the greater will be their difficulty in plucking out of their hearts the arrow which he shot into them by his unwarranted rebuke. Again, on an occasion when he should have administered a rebuke, he may have offered false comfort to the delight of all false Christians, who disregard all the rest of his sermon and lay hold of only that part which permits them to regard themselves as good Christians, when they are anything but that. Is it not an awful condition for a carnally secure person to get into and to remain in his blindness until the final summons consigns him to eternal perdition?

Mistakes like these may happen even to a sincere pastor. In a moment of inattention, when he is not on his guard and does not pray while he is writing his sermon, God may permit him to rely on his own strength in order to make him see the sorry results which he has achieved without prayer. Imagine the

anguish of a minister who has to blame himself when he sees some parishioner of his walking in a wrong path! Every one of your sermons must be the product of heartfelt prayer. When you sit down to the task of writing your sermon and feel that you are distracted, cold, and dead, you must not think: "That cannot be helped; I must fill this page." No; lay your pen aside; call earnestly upon your Father in heaven to lift you out of your miserable state of mind, to give you a fervent heart, to overcome everything in you that is not godly, to let the breath of His Holy Spirit enter your heart, and you will be able to do more than merely *write down* words of comfort whose import you do not at all feel and which leave your own heart cheerless. You will not indulge in the futile thought that all is well with regard to your sermon since you are only repeating what is in the Bible. Your most serious purpose while preparing your sermon will be to find a way of making a goodly haul with the Gospel net.

Ministers are at fault in this respect more than we imagine. Some of them waste much time during the week, being occupied, not with godless affairs, to be sure, yet not with the one thing needful. Sunday comes, and, standing in their pulpits, they are unprepared to give their people the best that is in them. Their hearers get the impression that they merely recite something because they have to without being concerned about whether their hearers are helped by what they offer them. That is awful. The time you spend in the pulpit is most valuable; it may determine the well-being, here and hereafter, of many thousands of people. Pity the preacher who does not redeem that time by offering his hearers the very best that he is able to give. He will, unless he is in tribulation, cheerfully resolve to preach this or that truth because he is convinced that his hearers will by the testimony of the Holy Spirit be impressed if they do not harden themselves against it. I said "unless he is in tribulation"; for what can a preacher accomplish if he has no confidence in what he preaches? In times of tribulation a faithful preacher is tempted to tear up the sermon he has written. By painful experiences like these God means to humble him. But the normal condition of a preacher, after struggling and wrestling with God during the preparation of his sermon, is one of confidence; he is certain that he has a sermon to offer which will bring souls to Christ as surely as the right bait and good angling of a skilled fisherman will catch fish. If a preacher talks without plan and purpose, he need not wonder that he does not achieve his aim; for he has none. Out with ministers and students preparing

for the ministry who go to work in a slovenly and careless manner, jotting down and reciting anything that comes into their mind, flows into their pen, and somehow leaps from their lips! That, as a rule, is what happens when the preacher extemporizes. Here I have in mind not only such as have plagiarized their entire sermon, but also those who have not adequately meditated upon the subject they intend to present to their hearers. Some preachers cannot speak with any degree of self-assurance if they have not meditated their sermon. After thorough meditation their flow of words is much better. There is a difference, too, between good judgment and genius. I am even inclined to say that a preacher must gradually become independent of his manuscript and thus give the Holy Spirit a chance to lay hold of him and suggest thoughts and words to him which had not come to him before.

The Apostle Paul writes, 2 Tim. 2, 15: “Study to show thyself approved unto God, a workman that needeth not to be ashamed, rightly dividing the Word of Truth.” The matter of paramount importance in a sermon, then, is rightly to divide the Law and the Gospel.

Thesis XVI.

In twelfth place, the Word of God is not rightly divided when the preacher tries to make people believe that they are truly converted as soon as they have become rid of certain vices and engage in certain works of piety and virtuous practises.

The great importance of this thesis becomes apparent when you reflect that a worse commingling of Law and Gospel than that which is censured in this thesis is not possible. Woe to the minister who by his manner of preaching leads his hearers to imagine that they are good Christians if they have ceased robbing and stealing, and that by and by they will get rid of any weakness still remaining in them. They turn the Gospel into Law because they represent conversion as a work of man, while genuine conversion, which produces a living faith in a person, is effected only by the Gospel.

This grossest form of commingling Law and Gospel is the most grievous fault of rationalists. The essence of their religion is to teach men that they become different beings by putting away their vices and leading a virtuous life, while the Word of God teaches us that we must become different men first,

and then we shall put away our particular sins and begin to exercise ourselves in good works. The doctrine which proposes to make men godly by their own works is the doctrine of pagans, Reformed Jews, and Turks. It proposes to empty a great river of iniquity by continually dipping up pails of water from it and expecting to reach the bottom some time. If a river of iniquity is to be dried up, the evil source from which it springs must first be stopped up, and then pure water can be led into it. Rationalists love to cite the well-known saying: Genuine repentance is to quit doing what you have been doing. The saying can be used in a right sense and has been so used by our forefathers. They meant to say: “You people who boast of having the right faith while you lead wicked lives, hush your prating about faith; quitting what you have been doing, that is genuine repentance.” The meaning which rationalists connect with the saying is this: “Do not worry; what God requires of a true Christian is that he quit doing what he has been doing. That is genuine repentance.” That is the abominable teaching of moralists. The Christian religion gives us the correct teaching in one word: μετανοεῖτε, which means: “Change your mind” or as Luther translates correctly: “Repent.” (If he had rendered this word etymologically, in accordance with its derivation, he would have amazed his readers.) With this word the Lord confronts the sinner, telling him that, first of all, a change of his innermost self must take place. What He requires is a new mind, a new heart, a new spirit; not quitting vice and doing good works. By making this the primary requisite for being a Christian, He puts the ax to the root of the evil tree. Rationalism and Romanism prune the noxious tree, but for every branch which they cut off new branches sprout forth, all of them still noxious. A tree of this kind must be grafted; sound branches must be inserted into it if it is to bear different fruit.

In proof of what I have said let me submit a few Bible texts. John 3, 3 we read: *Jesus answered and said unto him, Verily, verily, I say unto thee, Except a man be born again, he cannot see the kingdom of God.* Nicodemus had approached the Lord with the statement: “Rabbi, we know that Thou art a teacher come from God; for no man can do these miracles that Thou doest except God be with him.” He expects, of course, that the Lord will be pleased with such a statement from a Pharisee and will say to him: “That is excellent. Continue as you have begun.” But not a word of this. Jesus slams the door of heaven shut in Nicodemus’s face and practically says to him: “I see you wish

to curry favor with Me by flattery. But if you are still in your old mind, you cannot enter heaven. You will have to become a different being, you will have to be born again.” Now Nicodemus reveals his mind by exclaiming: “How can a man be born when he is old? Can he enter the second time into his mother’s womb and be born?” But the Lord repeats His previous statement and enlarges upon it: “Verily, verily, I say unto thee, Except a man be born of water and of the Spirit, he cannot enter into the kingdom of God. That which is born of the flesh is flesh, and that which is born of the Spirit is spirit.” The Lord meant to say: “All that you undertake to do while still in your carnal nature is sin; you must become spiritual before genuine spiritual fruits will begin to show themselves in your life.”

Matt. 12, 33 we read: *Either make the tree good and his fruit good, or else make the tree corrupt and his fruit corrupt; for the tree is known by his fruits.* Plant a good tree, and it will bear good fruit; plant a corrupt tree, and it will bear corrupt fruit. This means: Unless a person is completely changed, unless he has become a new creature, has been born anew, with a new mind, all his doings will be corrupt fruit; for by nature every man is a corrupt tree.

Matt. 15, 13 our Lord says: *“Every plant which My heavenly Father hath not planted will be rooted up.”* Those works only which God has wrought are good. Any work which a person has produced by the power of his reason and natural will is a plant that will have to be rooted up. God will not recognize it, but demand that it be removed out of His sight as a sin and an abomination, because it has sprung from a corrupt heart, a heart that cares nothing for God. It is polluted water, flowing from a stinking fountain. True Christians know full well and need not be told that this is so: no matter what they do, even if it be ever so beautiful a performance, they are aware that it was not right, since they did not do it from love of God and their fellow-men, but in a mechanical fashion or because they wished to show off their Christianity. A Christian is quick to discern whether any work of his has been planted by God or by Adam. Any person still unable to discern this may know that he has not yet experienced *μετάνοια*, a change of heart, and that the Holy Spirit is not yet in him. The moment the Holy Spirit has entered into him, he cannot do a thing because he wishes to comply with a demand of the Law but the Spirit will promptly inform him that the deed is

worthless. He may give some one a thousand dollars, and the Spirit will urge him immediately to examine himself whether or not he was prompted toward his generous act by love of God or his fellow-man. If not, he will be told that his deed is worthless in the sight of God, nothing but sham, and that the blessing of God does not rest upon it.

Jeremiah writes, chap. 4, 3: *Thus saith the Lord to the men of Judah and Jerusalem, Break up your fallow ground and sow not among thorns.* A remarkable declaration! We know its meaning well enough. Sowing wheat into ungrubbed land, soil still covered with brushwood, will not yield a harvest worth while. We must first clear the ground, remove all scrub growth, cut down the trees, or at least thin the forest sufficiently to give the sprouting seed the necessary air. That is a picturesque description of conversion. A person must first be given a new heart in conversion, and into this new heart the seed of every good work may then be sown.

1 Cor. 13, 3 the apostle says: *Though I bestow all my goods to feed the poor, and though I give my body to be burned and have not charity, it profiteth me nothing.* This remarkable passage has a particular bearing on our thesis. What is all-important are not the works themselves, but the love from which they proceed. I may be so abjectly poor that I am not able to do anything, and yet, in God's estimate I may abound in good works, if, while I am suffering poverty according to the will of God, love awakens in me the desire to do good unto all men. God takes the will for the deed. All depends on our inward love, not on our external works. Before his conversion, Paul was, "as touching the Law," without reproach; nobody could prefer a charge against him. Still he declared all his old righteousness to be dung. This does not apply to his really good works; for concerning them he says that he will receive a great reward of mercy for them.

Rom. 14, 23 Paul says: *Whatsoever is not of faith is sin.* This momentous statement corroborates the declaration of the apostle quoted above that even surrendering one's body to the flames is worthless if the act does not spring from love, hence from faith; for love does not enter a person's heart except through faith. How blind, then, must a preacher be who proposes to make men godly by urging them to do good works! A person must first become godly before he can perform good works.

Even believing pastors may, without being aware of it, slip into a horrible commingling of Law and Gospel, not so much in their sermons as in their private ministrations and in the exercise of church discipline. Many pastors and congregations make mistakes in applying church discipline. They may be dealing with a drunkard who readily professes sorrow over his sins, as these people usually do. An inexperienced minister is easily deceived by such a profession. The drunkard may be suspended from church membership and placed under surveillance for three months. Presently some brother brings the good news that the drunkard has kept himself sober all that time, and the minister decides that the drunkard is now converted, while in reality he is still quite a godless person. Beware of being deceived thus! The same may happen when a habitually profane person who has been admonished by the congregation quits cursing for a while. Or take the case of a person who is negligent in church attendance, who, therefore, certainly is not a Christian. After he has been brought before the congregation he may come to church for several successive Sundays. But does this outward act alone make him a Christian? By no means; any godless person is able to do what such a one is doing. The aforementioned persons must be made to realize that no Christian acts like them; if he does, he cannot possibly be in a state of grace. But it requires labor on the part of the minister till these persons are reborn by the Word of God. If he is unwilling to perform this labor, he neglects the souls of such persons. — Or take the case of tardy communicants who will come to the Sacrament once again after the minister has reproved them. If he is satisfied with that, he is guilty of commingling Law and Gospel. Or take the sin of avarice. A congregation may be so stingy as to refuse to take up a collection; it may fail to pay the pastor his salary. In that case the pastor must not resolve to preach his people a sharp sermon in order to open their purses. Opening purses by means of the Law is no achievement at all. He must preach in a manner that will rouse them out of their spiritual sleep and death. If he does not do that, he falls under the censure of our sixteenth thesis.

On John 3, 3, which I just cited, *Luther* comments as follows (St. L. Ed. VII, 1854): “Our doctrine, then, denounces all works as worthless and futile if the person doing them has not been born again. [Mark you: this is not Pietism, as some orthodox preachers falsely termed it, but Christianity.] For this reason we consider this the principal part of the instruction which people must be given regarding the new birth: they must first be told that they are all

spiritually dead and that any good that may be in their way of living, their monastic order, their fasting, and any other practise, will not help them a whit to obtain forgiveness of sins, until they are born again and made new creatures.” Remember, if you do not tell your people this truth, if you do not wield this trusty weapon in your ministry, you will gather about you a congregation of none but legalistic Pharisees.

“Let us now hear what this new birth must be like. We base our teaching concerning it on the fact that Christ twice affirms it by an oath, saying: ‘Verily, verily, I say unto thee, Except a man be born again,’ etc. He means to say: You must not imagine, Nicodemus, that you will be saved because you are an honest, pious man. True, we art to lead an honest, decent, and peaceable life in this world. If we fail to live thus, Master Hans the Hangman will come along with his sword and noose and will enforce the commandments which you have broken by putting you where you can no longer break them, thus teaching you that, if you will not obey, you will have to suffer. But your good works are worthless when you begin to put this estimate on them, that they are to earn heaven for you. For these works, this goodly conduct, gain for you merely a proper living here in time and keep you out of the executioner’s hands and from the gallows or from being expelled from your house and home and being separated from your wife and children. Thus, the fact that you are an honorable citizen of Jerusalem secures your life, honor, and distinction in this city. But if you wish to get to heaven and into the Church and kingdom of Christ, you must understand that you will have to become a new man. You must consider yourself an unborn infant, who is not only unable to do a single good work, but has not even attained to life and being as yet. That is what Christians preach. The Christian doctrine teaches us that we must first become different people, that is, we must be born again. How is this done? By the Holy Spirit and by the water of Baptism. After I have been born again and have been made godly and God-fearing, I begin a new life, and what I do now, in my regenerate state, is good. If Adam had remained in the state of innocence in which he had been created, he could have spent his life doing anything he pleased: fishing for trout, catching robins, or planting trees. All his doings would have been good and holy works, and there would have been no sin in them. Eve would have nursed and tended her babies, and her works, too, would have been altogether precious and good. For her person had been created good, upright, pure, and

holy, and hence all her works, her eating and drinking and everything would have been right and good. But now that man has strayed into sin and fallen from his first estate, nothing that he does is good; he sins in all that he does, even when he prays; for he does everything as a sinner. Whatever he does is wrong, even when he fasts and prays, leads the strict life of a Carthusian, puts on a monk's garb, and goes barefoot. All these things are sin because the person is evil, not having been born again; and nothing that such a person does avails him [before God].

“Accordingly, Christ tells Nicodemus practically this: I am come to preach a different doctrine about the way how to become good: you must be born again. This doctrine has been written into the Scripture aforetime, but you do not read it, or if you read it, you do not understand it; to wit, that in order to do good works a person must be born again; for sinners, being corrupt themselves, cannot but beget more sinners. Matt. 7 the Lord says: If the tree is corrupt, it does not bear good fruit. Thistles do not bear figs nor thorns, grapes.”

Luther insists that in a regenerate person everything that he does is God's work. Even when he treats himself to a hearty meal, eats or sleeps, he is doing a good work, not only when he engages in hard labor. A servant of the Law may slave and slave, but all his activities are a martyrdom that is preparing him for perdition. A Christian has the right mind in all that he does; therefore all his actions are God pleasing. From a pure fountain nothing but good, sweet water can flow.

Luther's reference to the monastic life in this connection means that, when a monk became a believer, all his doings, also his wearing of a friar's cloak, became good, because he was then acting from a right motive, being convinced that God wished him to serve in his calling.

Also the Old Testament is full of this teaching, that men must obtain a new heart and a new spirit, that their hearts must be circumcised before they can be, acceptable to God. The gist of all this teaching is that Christ wants to make us godly from the root upward.

Let me give you another testimony of *Luther* from his *Sermon on the Liberty of a Christian Man*, of the year 1520. This is the treatise which Luther dedicated to the Pope. He undertook to enlighten the Pope and told him the

truth in an amazing fashion. Luther, you know, was not afraid of men, not even of the devil. During his exile at the Wartburg he was one day startled by a terrible racket, as if a hundred thousand barrels were being hurled downstairs. He exclaimed, “What is the matter?” but checked himself immediately, saying: “Ah, it’s you, devil! If I had known that, I should not even have stepped out of my room.” Any other person would have been seized with a deadly fright at the thought that he was being harassed by the devil, but Luther treated the devil with contempt, knowing that he is a haughty spirit, to whom nothing is more intolerable than contempt.

Luther writes (St. L. Ed. XIX, 1003 f.): “Good and pious works never produce a good and pious person; but a good and pious person produces good and pious works. In every instance the person must first be good and pious before he can do any good work. Good works follow, and proceed from, a pious and good person, as Christ says, Matt. 7, 18: ‘A good tree cannot bring forth evil fruit, neither can a corrupt tree bring forth good fruit.’ Now it is evident that fruits do not bear the tree, nor does the tree grow on the fruit, but the reverse — trees bear fruits, and fruits grow on trees. As there must be trees before there can be fruits, and as the fruits do not make the tree either good or corrupt, but the tree produces the fruits, even so man must first be either good or corrupt before he does good or corrupt works. His works do not make him either good or corrupt, but he does either good or corrupt works.

“We observe this in all the crafts. A good or a bad house does not make a good or a bad carpenter, but a good or bad carpenter builds a good or bad house. No work produces a master corresponding to it, but as the master, so his work. Man’s works come under the same rule; according as man is either a believer or an unbeliever, his works are either good or evil, not vice versa, so that he would be godly and a believer according to his works. Since works do not make men believers, they do not make him godly either. But faith, which makes men godly, likewise produces good works.”

These are matters which are readily understood by us now, but before Luther could sing a song like this, he had to pass through many severe conflicts. It is surprising that as early as 1520 he was able to picture the relation of works to faith as he does in the passage which I have cited.